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RURAL POPULATION MIGRATION IN
THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

A Statement By

Donald G. Hay,
Sociologist

Presented Before The Special Committee Of The
United States House Of Representatives
Investigating The Interstate Migration Of Destitute Citizens

Lincoln, Nebraska
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Population of the Northern Great Plains

In 1930, some 3,514,828 people lived in the five States comprising the area known as the Northern Great Plains - Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Seventy years ago there were only 166,887 persons in the same area. The population increased 2,708,289 persons, or 1,623 percent, between 1870 and 1910, with a noticeable slowing up of numbers since 1910.

The total population in four of the States, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, decreased 132,615, or 4.5 percent, from 1930 to 1940, according to preliminary releases of the 1940 Census. Between 1930 and 1940, 187 out of 238 counties in these four States lost population. The loss was 20 percent or more in 30 counties, and in two counties the loss was more than 40 percent of the population there in 1930. Of the 51 counties in the four States which had an increase of population during the last decade, nine increased 20 percent or more and three counties in Wyoming gained 40 percent or more.

Wheat has not been the only export, for the area has been producing a human surplus for many years. Large families and a high rate of natural increase have been characteristic of these States generally since their settlement.

The total population of the Northern Plains was 2.9 percent of the population of the United States in 1930.

Distribution of Total Population, 1930

Agriculture is to the Northern Great Plains what coal and iron are to Pittsburgh and what automobiles are to Detroit. Early homestead policy provided for the settlement of four homestead families in each square mile of territory and this practice set up the homestead pattern for much of the early settlement. Agriculture is carried on on an extensive scale throughout the area except in the eastern or more humid parts and in the few spots devoted to specialty crops and irrigated territory. Villages and small cities are in general scattered, with a tendency toward concentration in the eastern part.

Residence Distribution of the Population, 1930

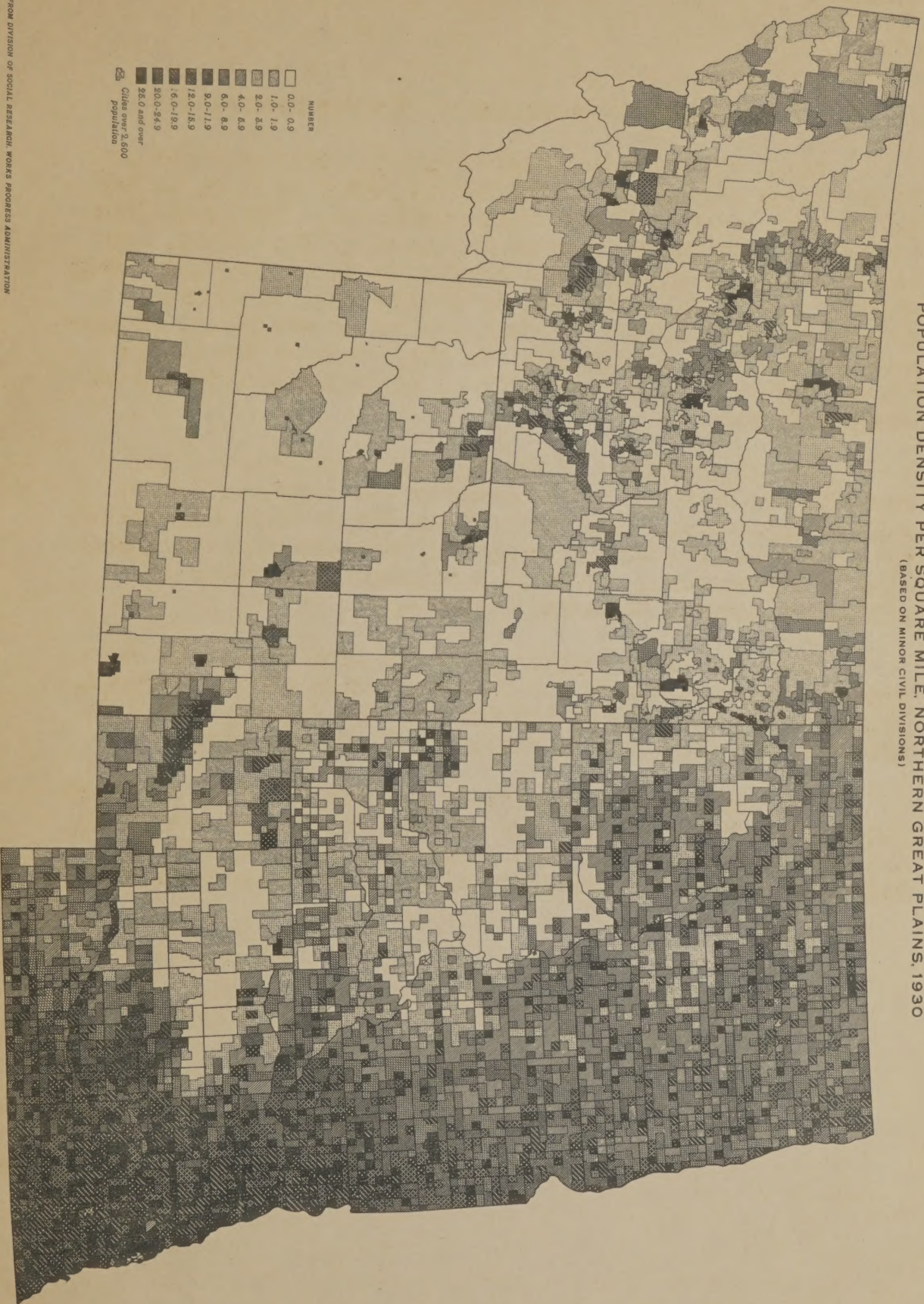
While the Northern Great Plains contained 2.9 percent of the total population of the United States in 1930, it had 5.4 percent of the nation's farm population. The rural-farm population constituted only 24.8 percent in the Nation, but was 46.8 percent of the total population in the Northern Great Plains. The lowest ratio was in Wyoming with 32 percent, whereas in North Dakota the farm population was almost 60 percent of the total population. No other area in the United States had so large a proportion of its population living on farms in 1930.

The predominance of the farming population and the agricultural industry is reflected in the rural-nonfarm or village population. The villages are the service stations of the farmer and are highly integrated with economic and social ties to agriculture. There is a constant interchange of population between farms and villages.

Even the urban population of the area is closely dependent upon agriculture for its maintenance and development. There is only one city of 100,000 and over (Omaha, Nebr.) in the area, and there are 29 cities of 10,000 and over.

The dominating influence of agriculture is an outstanding characteristic of the five States. Particular attention can well be given to the farm population in appraising the migration problem as associated with the Northern Great Plains.

POPULATION DENSITY PER SQUARE MILE, NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS, 1930 (BASED ON MINOR CIVIL DIVISIONS)



NUMBER

0.0-0.9
1.0-1.9
2.0-2.9
4.0-5.9
6.0-8.9
9.0-11.9
12.0-15.9
16.0-19.9
20.0-24.9
25.0 and over

Cities over 2,500 population

Native White Migrants Born in Northern Great Plains
States and Living Elsewhere, 1910 and 1930

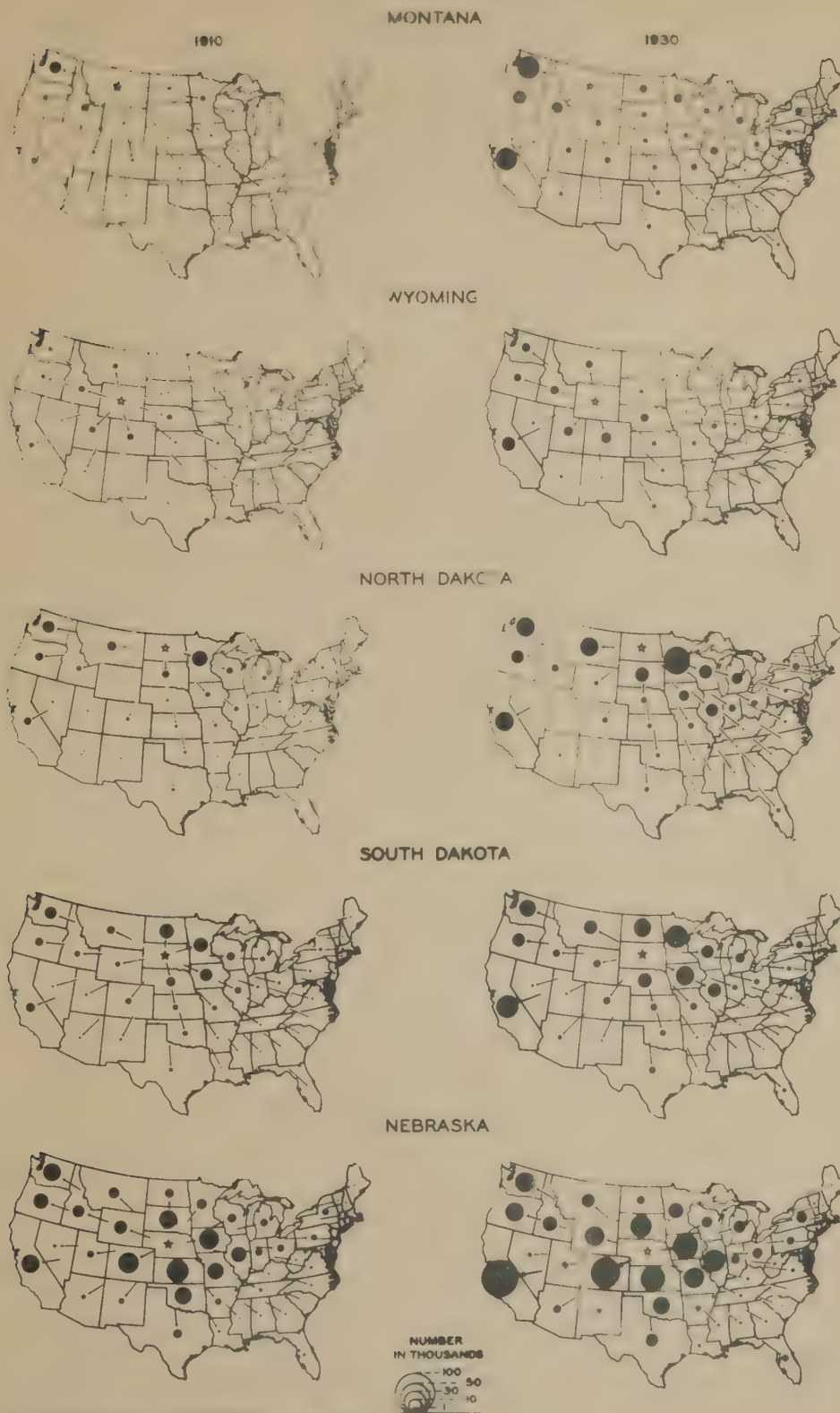
This area was originally settled as part of the great western movement. The predominating source of early settlers in regard to native-born white migrants, was the States to the east of the plains. But by the time the Dakotas achieved statehood in 1889, persons who had been born there were to be found in every State. Since 1910 these States have also contributed a considerable number to the movement to other areas. By 1930, persons born in Nebraska but no longer living there, exceeded the number of residents who had been born elsewhere. The trend was the same in each of the other four States, with the exception of Wyoming.

Movement to the Pacific Coast States from the Northern Great Plains was occurring in a considerable degree as early as 1910 but a greater proportion of the migrants were heading westward by 1930. In both 1910 and 1930 there had also been much movement of population to States to the east which had contributed heavily to settlement of the Plains. Of the persons born in the five States but residing elsewhere in 1930, 39.4 percent were living in States east of the Plains, 11.4 percent in States to the south, and 49.2 percent were in States west of the Northern Great Plains.

The migration of population, both within the area and to other States, did not receive particular attention so long as the migrants were financially able to establish themselves elsewhere, or other areas had ready opportunities for their services.

A study of 12 townships in western North Dakota indicates that instability of population has been characteristic of parts in that State ever since it was settled, with recurring waves of migration into and out of the localities. In these 12 townships, nearly 40 percent of the farm operators present in 1919 had moved out by 1926, and for every 10 farmers leaving, there were 6 new farm operators who came to the townships during the period.

NATIVE WHITE MIGRANTS BORN IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS STATES AND RESIDING ELSEWHERE 1910 AND 1930



Source U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Net Migration of Farm Population, 1930-35

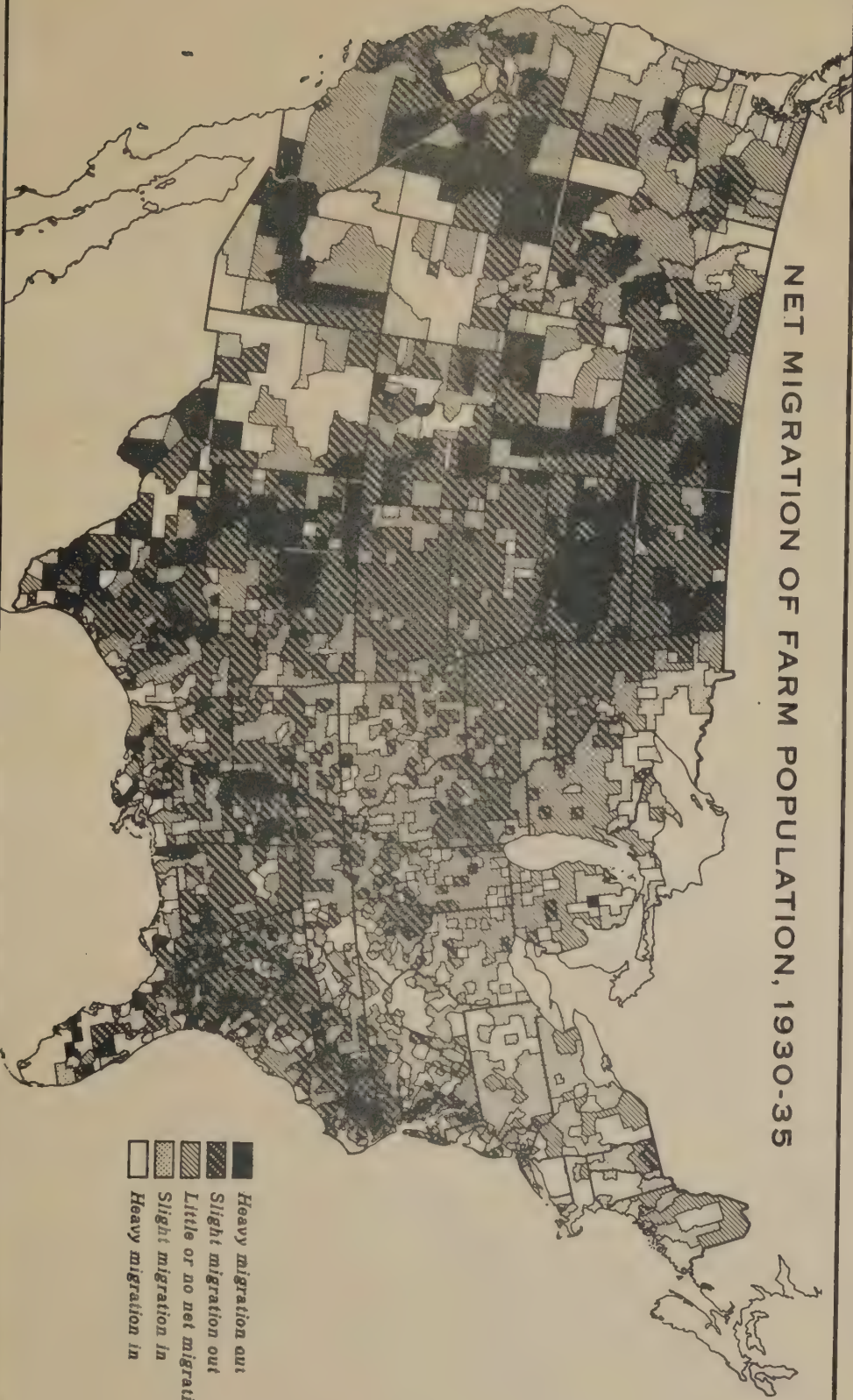
The volume of net migration from farms in the Northern Great Plains between 1930 and 1935 was slightly higher than during the 1920's on the basis of average movement per year.

The chart, Net Migration of Farm Population 1930-35, indicates that heavy migration out was characteristic of a large number of counties in this area.

The Northern Plains had become an export area for population before 1930 except in the western parts and the droughts of the 1930's served to speed up the movement away from the farms. Continued mechanization of agriculture and adverse economic situations were also influential factors in occasioning out-movement of farm people.

Studies indicate that population migration alone was usually an unsatisfactory technique in providing adjustments for both the individuals and the areas involved. Too often periods of in-movement have followed periods of abandonment, and people come to take the places of others who have failed to make the desired livelihood in an area.

NET MIGRATION OF FARM POPULATION, 1930-35



- Heavy migration out
- ▤ Slight migration out
- Little or no net migration
- ▥ Slight migration in
- ░ Heavy migration in

Northern Great Plains Migration, 1930-39

Preliminary data from the 1940 Census, together with total natural increase (number of births over deaths) for the last decade, indicate there was a net out-migration of slightly more than 400,000 persons from Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, from 1930 to 1940. This indicates that there was some 12 percent loss of population, due to net migration, during the 10 years in these 4 States. All 4 States experienced a loss of population on the basis of net migration, with rates of loss of 1 percent for Wyoming, 11.9 percent for Nebraska, 15.8 percent in South Dakota, and 16.2 percent in North Dakota.

The generally high birth rates in these States and resulting natural increase were able to offset the net migration losses to a considerable extent.

Evidence from particular studies of population movement is cited as describing the net population change in certain areas.

A study of population migration in four areas of the Northern Great Plains is now being completed, and certain preliminary data are available. One area was selected in each of the following States: Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Three of the areas included only open-country population, the fourth included a village as well as open country.

The pattern of population change in these farm areas during the 1930's is one of increase during the first few years of the decade, followed by an out-migration of such volume that there was a net loss for the entire decade. The population of these farm areas reached its peak in the early part of 1934, and net losses have occurred regularly since then. In the village, which had a relatively smaller loss than the farming areas for the entire period, there was a continued increase in population until 1936; since then the migration away has more than offset the earlier gains. In both village and farming areas, the net loss for the decade understates the situation, for the net losses were concentrated in the later years after there had been some increases.

All of the areas experienced both an out-migration as well as an in-migration during the 1930's. A small net in-migration of households to the farm areas occurred between 1930 and 1933, but after that there was a net out-migration. The volume of out-migration reached its peak in 1936 and then decreased again. Meanwhile the volume of in-migration had fluctuated somewhat, reaching a low point in 1936. The subsequent recovery, however, did not again raise it above the level reached in 1933. The largest net loss was reported in 1936 - after that, net losses were less and during 1939 the number of households moving into these areas almost

equaled the number moving out. In contrast to the movement of households, there was a net movement of single persons away from these areas throughout the decade, except in 1930 and 1933.

As a result of the net migrations from the areas and a reduction in birth rates, the farm areas included in the survey experienced net losses in population ranging between 10 and 40 percent. The loss in the village was about 15 percent.

Each of the areas had a large turnover of population, the total numbers moving in and out being much greater than the net change as reported. During each of the years there was a continual movement in and out - some households and single persons moving out while others were coming in, at least partially filling the gaps. In one of the farm areas, for example, there were 121 households in 1930. Ten years later only 68 of them (55 percent) were still there. Fifty-two of them had moved out and 1 was dissolved by death. But during the same time, 52 households moved into the area (the same number as those moving out) and 20 of them were still there in 1940. The 1940 population thus included 88 households, of which nearly one-fourth had moved in since 1930. More than 3 times as many households actually moved as would have been required to effect the net migration loss of 32 households. Similar movements were found in each of the survey areas. Although this continual turnover of population is not new in the area, it is of great importance to the conduct of those activities which depend upon social bonds that ordinarily develop through a continued contact with neighbors. These communities faced at the same time the adjustments required by the departure of former residents, as well as those involved in the absorption of newcomers.

A study of farm-population mobility in sample areas in Montana indicated an increase in these areas of 26 percent from 1926 to 1932, the year of peak population, and a decrease of 17 percent from 1926 to 1937. The population of these areas, which included localities in western Montana having an influx of population, increased 5 percent for the entire period from 1926 to 1937. The years of greatest entrance of farm families were 1928 and 1929, with the years of greatest exodus being 1936 and the first half of 1937.

Studies of farm-population movement in North Dakota for 1936-38 indicated considerable instability of farm residents for this period. An estimated 57,000 persons moved from North Dakota farms during the 3-year period, with some 45,000 going to villages or cities in North Dakota and in other States, and 12,000 moving to farms in other States. During the same 3-year period, an estimated 11,000 persons moved to North Dakota farms. About 9,000 persons moved from villages and cities to farms in the State and 2,000 came from farms in other States.

Sources and Destinations of Population Movement from Selected Areas in the Northern Great Plains

Information as to direction of recent migration is based on information from particular studies.

Preliminary data from the study of population migration in four areas of the Northern Great Plains indicated that migrations to the West Coast are a small part of the total migration from these areas. Although a high degree of mobility was characteristic, most of the migrants came from or went to nearby areas. However, migrants to the West Coast States were much more common than migrants from those States.

Almost 70 percent of all households and single persons who moved out of the survey areas (townships) between 1930 and 1940, went to some other place within the same State; approximately 30 percent of the total remained within the same county. Among those who went outside their own State, one-half went to the Pacific Coast States (California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho). Migrants from these areas to the Pacific Coast preferred the northwestern States, which received $2\frac{1}{2}$ times as many of them as did California. Most of the others were scattered through the Midwestern States - the southern and northeastern States receiving virtually none of the migrants.

Migration to the Pacific Coast States was most frequent during the years 1934-37, when the total number of migrants away from the survey areas was greatest. More than two-thirds of the households and single persons moving to the Pacific Coast States left during the 4 years, 1934-37. Following 1937 there were declines both in the total out-movement and in the proportion going to the Pacific Coast States.

Migrants who left the survey area, but remained within the same State, tend to travel relatively short distances, frequently remaining in the same county or in nearby counties. The migrants from the village were somewhat more widely scattered throughout the State than those who moved from farm areas.

The exchange of population in the surveyed area indicates a shift from east to west, particularly among those who cross State lines. The migrants from the Pacific Coast States were only one-fourth as numerous as those moving to those States, but the States east of the Northern Great Plains contributed half as many migrants to the survey areas as they received from them. No evidence of any considerable return movement on the part of persons who had previously left the survey areas was found.

The major source of migrants to the survey area was nearby territory. Nearly 9 out of every 10 households and single persons who moved into these areas came from within the same States, with the same county contributing slightly more than half of that total.

Farm operators who left farms in the surveyed areas were more frequently replaced by farmers from nearby areas; nearly three-fourths of the "new farmers" came from within the same county. Most of them were young men less than 35 years of age in 1940, and more than half of them had not had previous experience as farm operators.

Households moving into the farm areas appear to have been somewhat larger than those leaving these same areas. The out-migrant households more frequently consisted of 2 persons than of any other number, but among the in-migrants, 4-person households were more numerous. However, the larger households, those consisting of 5 or more persons, were no more frequent among the in- or out-migrants than among those who remained in the survey area throughout the decade. The average size of households moving away from the farm areas and those who lived continuously in the area were 3.7 and 3.8 persons, respectively; whereas, the average size of the households moving to these same areas was 4.1 persons.

Those individuals who were farm owners throughout the period were less mobile than the others in the sense that they were more likely to have lived on the same farm and that they were less likely to be among the migrants. Those who improved their tenure status during the period also were less frequent among the migrants. Tenants who retained their tenure status throughout the period were about equally represented among the migrants and nonmigrants, but loss of farm ownership definitely appears to have been a factor leading to migration away.

Information from the farm-population study in Montana for the years 1926-37 showed that of the 317 households moving out of the survey areas from 1926-36, 74 percent moved to other parts of Montana, 13 percent to Western States, 9 percent east, and the remainder moved southward or to Canada.

A study of farm population changes in North Dakota during 1936 and 1937 showed that over one-half of the persons moving from farms went to a place in the same county and about two-thirds remained in the State. One-third of the migrants went to other States. The Pacific Coast States were the favorite destination of those who went outside North Dakota. Washington, Oregon, and California received more than half of the farm migrants from North Dakota. Over one-third of the out-of-State migrants moved to the neighboring States of Minnesota, South Dakota, and Montana. About 40 percent of all the farm migrants moving to some other place within North Dakota went to villages or cities within the State.

Sample surveys of farm-population movement in South Dakota during 1937 and 1938 indicated that 42.9 percent of the out-of-State migrants went to adjoining States; 42.7 percent to western States including California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Colorado; 10.7 percent to the east; and 3.7 percent moved to southern States. During the 2 years, Minnesota received more of the migrants than any other State, with other leading States of destination being California, Oregon, Washington, and Iowa.

Indications are that recent migrations from the Northern Great Plains to the Pacific Coast States as well as to other States are particularly significant in regard to the economic status and prospects of the migrants. The volume of migration had apparently been large for several years before 1930. The recent migrants are characterized by a lack of ready capital for self-support and investment in new undertakings. The migrant farm operator or farm youth experienced in grain- and livestock-farming practices of the plains is poorly adapted to seasonal labor in specialty crops to which labor market he is often forced because of his lack of capital, skill, and opportunity to undertake a more permanent occupation.

Studies indicate that the choice of a destination is often an unplanned matter. Better guidance of migrants is greatly needed if the adjustment of man and resources is to be attained.

Natural Increase in Population of the Northern Great Plains

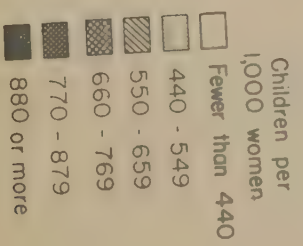
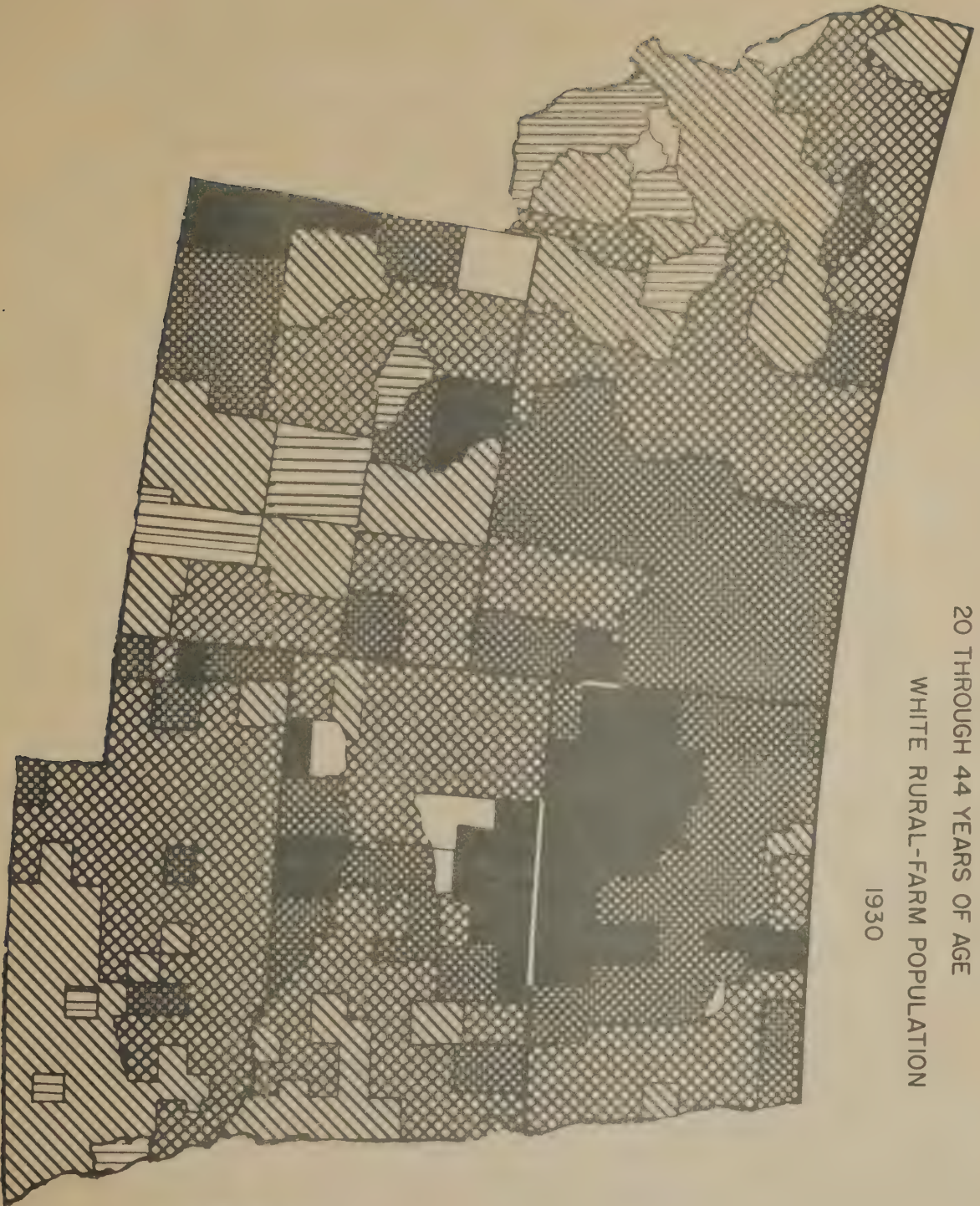
There are very significant differentials in natural increase of the population in the five States according to residence. At the death rate generally prevailing in the rural population of the entire Nation in 1930, 440 children per 1,000 women suffice to replace the present population. In areas where the number of children under 5 years of age is fewer than 440 per 1,000 rural women 20-44 years of age, the rural population will not permanently replace itself. In areas where the number of children under 5 years of age is as high as 550 per 1,000 women 20-44 years of age, a 25 percent surplus of children above actual replacement needs is being produced, and so on.

The ratio of children to women in the farm population was 65 percent in excess of replacement in the Northern Great Plains in 1930. The ratio is less in villages and cities, but even in case of both of these groups in the Northern Plains it is well above a replacement rate.

The ratio for the total population was some 28 percent in excess of a replacement rate.

It would appear that in considering a desirable adjustment between people and the agricultural resources in the Great Plains extensive migration to other areas of economic opportunity must be provided for offsetting the considerable natural increase above replacement needs in the region. Opportunities in urban areas for rural youth, highly dependent upon equality of educational training for the rural young people, is apparently a necessity to keep from intensifying the present disparity in economic levels of living between rural and city areas.

CHILDREN UNDER 5 YEARS OF AGE PER 1,000 WOMEN
20 THROUGH 44 YEARS OF AGE
WHITE RURAL-FARM POPULATION
1930



Migratory Harvest Laborers in North Dakota and Kansas

A study of harvest labor in North Dakota and Kansas reveals clear-cut differences between these two States in both stability and extent of demand for regular hired help or farm wage workers. In Kansas the demand for this labor was relatively small and highly stable. In North Dakota, on the other hand, a much larger demand, which fluctuated widely from season to season, was in evidence. It is probable that these differences largely result from the greater mechanization of Kansas farm operations and the consequent increased labor capacity and efficiency of the operators themselves, but the slightly greater diversification on farms covered by this study in North Dakota may have been partially responsible. In both States, the employment of farm wage workers is at a low level. The greater percentage of farms in North Dakota having such unpaid family labor is probably due in part to the higher natural increase in that State as compared with Kansas. This also shows a piling up of youth on farms --- not unemployed but underemployed.

The wheat-harvest period has been the time of heavy employment of all available local labor, and of considerable migrant or transient labor. It has been estimated that a minimum of 100,000 transient laborers were used in the wheat harvest in the 1920's. Need for this transient labor in the wheat harvest has rapidly diminished with the increased development and application of efficient mechanical devices. This process of mechanizing the wheat harvest, as typified by the use of the grain combine, is at a more highly developed stage in central and western Kansas than in North Dakota. About 90 percent of the wheat acreage in Kansas was "combined" while only some 25 percent of the North Dakota wheat acreage was combined in 1938. It has been estimated that about 25,000 transient laborers obtained work in the North Dakota wheat harvest in 1938. It is probable, however, that even with 50 percent efficiency in the distribution of available labor within the States, there would be no harvest work for any transient laborers. This is the situation in North Dakota, the leading spring-wheat State, where mechanization, as represented by the combine, was at only a 25-percent stage of development in 1938.

At present, the labor supply for the wheat harvest stands in an inverse relationship to the small demand. All available evidence points to a further exaggeration in the future of this already significant unbalance. It is estimated that there were three men for every job open in the grain harvest of North Dakota in 1938, beyond the supply of resident farm labor and local labor.

[illegible]

BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

A decreased dependence on urban areas for the wheat-harvest labor supply has been noted. In 1924, a little more than one-half of the hired harvest laborers in the midwest wheat belt were farm-reared. Nearly three-fourths of all hired farm labor, and even two-thirds of the transients, in the North Dakota wheat harvest in 1938 were farm-reared. More than one-third of the transients interviewed came from Minnesota, and one in seven came from Wisconsin homes.

Information concerning the age of the laborer indicates that youthfulness is a characteristic of the harvest worker. Half of all hired laborers were 25 years old or under, and nearly half of the transients were under 25 years of age.

The economic status of the laborers in the 1938 grain harvest in North Dakota was ascertained in terms of possession of a bank account, life insurance, or property ownership. Only about 1 in every 20 had any bank account and only about one-sixth of the laborers carried any life insurance. Less than 5 percent of all the hired harvest hands owned any farm property and less than 2 percent owned any real estate other than farm property.

Earnings of harvest laborers are rather low as shown by reports from 322 transient laborers. All had had grain-harvest work in some State in 1938. They were leaving North Dakota when interviewed and there was little possibility of their obtaining other grain-harvest work that year. The average amount earned was \$45 covering an average period of 17 days worked. These 322 transients reported a loss of some 14 days between harvest jobs and about $4\frac{1}{2}$ days without pay while on jobs of the harvest. The actual costs incurred by these laborers between jobs after they had come to North Dakota, for meals and for other living expenses, amounted to \$14. Their net earnings between the time they were first employed at any job and their last job in the small-grain harvest amounted to some \$31. This still doesn't provide for the costs of the laborer for travel between States or for returning to his home or going to other employment. Of more than 200 hired harvest hands interviewed, none had net earnings of as much as \$100, while the average net earning was well under \$30.

The harvest laborers, whether unpaid family workers, regular hired laborers, local workers, or transient laborers, are apparently alike in having the following characteristics: low average earning power, a lack of financial status, and a lack of security.

